

Christmas Hymns

REVIEW: If you have been with us in recent weeks, you know that we have been taking a look at some of the Christmas songs that we love and cherish. Our first week we looked at Charles Wesley's second most famous Christmas hymn: *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. We saw how Wesley masterfully wrote the hymn in such a way that it applies not just to Jesus first coming at Christmas, but also to His second coming that we are to be anticipating.

Last week we looked at John Wade's famous carol, *O Come All Ye Faithful*. The author was obscured from history for close to 200 years before the truth came to light that John Wade did in fact author the song. We looked at the beauty and depth of the song, and the lesser known verses that hold such deep theology. The song helps us to understand our need for understanding our theology.

INTRO: Today we go back to our first composer, Charles Wesley and take a look at his most famous Christmas hymn: *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. It is a song that mixes five different men of history, across distance and time to eventually produce the carol we know and love today.

I. Charles Wesley's story

A. Two weeks ago we gave you some of the background on Charles Wesley, so we do not have to go over everything again

B. For this story, we start with Charles trip to America

1. As you recall, he came over with his brother John Wesley
2. They struggled in the new world, made little headway in their ministries and developed few relationships
3. During this time Charles served as secretary to General James Oglethorpe
 - a) Oglethorpe became Governor of Georgia
 - b) Charles became sick and stayed only about four months in Georgia before returning to England - his brother John stayed longer, eventually brought up on charges and being run out of "Dodge" for "introducing songs in the church that were not authorized"
 - c) Charles time in the colonies was hard, and he was astonished at the life they had to live there

(1) Remember that Charles and John came from a privileged home

C. When Charles Wesley returned to England, he was assigned to a church in Islington

1. Charles was a reformer, which is the kind way of saying he was a bit cavalier in his approach to church, compared to the approach of the day
 - a) Charles did such radical things as visited prisoners in prison
 - b) He was a free thinker and supported those that did as well
 - c) He would even hold church services outdoors

Christmas Hymns

d) Perhaps his most radical view was that Christian music needed to be filled with personal witness, energy, and excitement

(1) What a wild man!

D. One day in 1737 while Charles Wesley was enjoying time in God's Word, reflection and stillness, he penned these words

1. "Hark! How the welkin rings, glory to the King of kings"

a) If you are like me and scratched your head on the word "welkin", here is the definition

b) Basic - to make a loud noise

c) Specific - "the vault of heaven makes a long noise"

2. With this line, Charles Wesley was able to write his Christmas hymn which he later set to one of his own melodies

3. The song, originally titled, *Hark! How All the Welkin Rings* began in Wesley's church and quickly became popular among others in the Methodist movement

a) He was very happy that his work was accepted by so many

II. Enter our second historical figure - George Whitefield

A. George Whitefield was an acquaintance of Charles Wesley, and a contemporary of Jonathan Edwards

1. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield were two of the dynamic preachers that touched off the "Great Awakening"

2. Jonathan Edwards has a sermon that most people have heard of, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God"

B. George Whitefield was a former bartender that became a Calvinist preacher

1. Now if you know your theologies, which I hope that you read, and study on your own, than you know Whitefield's being a Calvinist would be a problem to Charles Wesley

a) Methodists as well as Wesleyans tend to have an Arminian view of salvation

(1) That means that man is not depraved - he is capable of good before God

(2) That man has a say in saving himself

(3) That God is not completely sovereign over the process of salvation

b) Whitefield would take the opposite view - and I would join him in that

2. I told you that Wesley was a bit of a radical and a reformist, but Whitefield was a complete revolutionary

a) Whitefield's fiery style and evangelistic messages kept him in trouble with the church of England

Christmas Hymns

- b) Because of his extremist approach, he was eventually kicked out of Anglican churches and had to preach in privately organized meetings, usually meeting in the open air
 - (1) But from these informal meetings the revival movement sprang up
 - (2) Giving rise to the Great Awakening
- 3. Whitefield was very charismatic, but not as well educated as Charles Wesley - although they attended the same college
 - a) Whitefield in some ways was the embodiment of the phrase “zeal without knowledge”
 - b) He was very passionate about the Lord, and about people knowing Christ, but did not always approach life in a manner that was consistent with the compassion Christ desired
- 4. Enter the real problem between these two great men from the history of our faith
 - a) George Whitefield, being a little more liberal, and not as literal in his handling of the Scriptures, re-wrote the first line of Charles Wesley’s hymn, *Hark! How All the Welkin Rings*, and thus began what has become an enduring myth of the Christmas story to this day
 - (1) Whitefield wrote, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing
 - (2) This made Charles Wesley enraged!
 - (a) The fact that they did not see eye to eye on theology was known
 - (b) But now, Whitefield changes Wesley’s song and has it published with different words
 - (c) And not just any words, but words that are not biblically accurate!
 - (3) The enduring myth of Christmas - one of them anyway - angels are never recorded as singing
 - (a) Don’t believe me?
 - (b) Luke 2:13 “ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying...”
 - b) So this was the real issue between these two men, used by God to influence millions of people over 300 years
 - (1) Wesley was so upset by Whitefield’s re-write that as long as he lived he refused to sing the lyrics Whitefield wrote
 - (2) But millions of people did acknowledge the change
- III. Enter William Cummings and Felix Mendelssohn, and Johann Gutenberg - our third, fourth, and fifth historical figures
 - A. The setting is now three decades after the death of Charles Wesley - the mid 1800’s

Christmas Hymns

B. William Cummings was a lead tenor in one of Felix Mendelssohn's operas:

Elijah

1. It was his dream come true to be singing in and being directed by the great composer
2. Later that same year (1847) Mendelssohn died

C. Several years later, 1855, Cummings borrowed from one of Mendelssohn's more famous works that was a tribute to Johann Gutenberg

1. Translated from German, the song title is simply "Festival Song"
2. Before Cummings combined Mendelssohn and George Whitefield's lyrics, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* was sung to the tune of Charles Wesley's *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*
3. After combining the music and the lyrics, Cummings gave us a beloved Christmas hymn, known around the world today

D. So on the road to forming this cherished song

1. It began with a misquoted verse of scripture by Whitefield
2. That was combined by Cummings with a tune
3. That was written by a great composer, to honor the man that invented moveable type printing press, and first printed the Bible

E. Neither Mendelssohn nor Charles Wesley probably would have approved of the combination

1. However, it does seem appropriate
2. The words of a man that lived his life to evangelize the world (Wesley)
3. Are combined with music that was written to honor the man that invented the way to mass-produce God's Word so the world could read the Bible

IV. The song itself is fairly straight-forward in its lyrics

A. The first verse calls direct attention to what the angels said

1. Granted, the first verse takes some poetic license with what the angels actually said
 - a) Luke 2:14
 - b) The angels said "Glory to God in the highest"
 - (1) Some poetic license there but still true to Scripture
 - (2) Jesus is the newborn King, and He is God - therefore glory is due him
 - c) The angels did say "peace on earth"
 - d) The rest however, is a summation of truths as a result of Jesus birth
 - (1) Particularly, "God and sinners reconciled"
 - (2) He may have been borrowing from the announcement in Matthew to Joseph about Jesus will save His people from their sins
2. From there, Charles Wesley speaks of our response to the news that the glorious new King has arrived

Christmas Hymns

- a) We are to be joyful and excited!
 - b) We are to join in with the angels
 - (1) Notice that an emotional response is called for
 - (2) AND a physical response
 - (a) This is a great lesson for all of us
 - (b) It is not enough to be moved by a sermon, lesson, song, or even the theology of the gospel
 - (c) We are to respond!
 - (d) If we do not respond in a tangible way, perhaps we were not really changed by the sermon, lesson, or the gospel
- B. Verse two begins with praising the Messiah (that is what Christ means)
- 1. Then Charles Wesley begins to combine two different passages of Scripture in incredible ways
 - 2. The first is from Galatians 4:4-5
 - a) "Late in time behold Him come"
 - b) It is another way of saying that at just the right time, Christ came to this earth
 - c) Application: God's timing is perfect
 - (1) Jesus did not come sooner than expected or needed, and He was not late
 - (2) God works on His timetable when he is ready for what needs to happen
 - (3) That is something we must trust
 - (a) That is something I continue to trust - when the time is right, I'll get married
 - (b) In the meantime, I rely on Him
 - (c) When the time is right, God will supply what you are seeking
 - (d) In the meantime, you rely, you rest, you trust in Him
 - 3. The second passage is from Philippians 2:5-11
 - a) The miracle of Christmas is not the star, the angels the Magi, or according to other Christmas songs the animals and baby Jesus made no noise
 - b) The miracle of Christmas is God showed up in human form
 - (1) That God humbled Himself to found in the same form as mankind
 - (2) That God put on a flesh suit to hang out with fallen humanity
 - (3) He is Emmanuel - God with us
 - c) And because He did that, because He was obedient to come, and to die, He deserves to be exalted
- C. The third verse reaches back to OT titles for the Messiah
- 1. Prince of peace

Christmas Hymns

2. Sun of Righteousness
 3. While that could just be something to take note of, we need to understand that it means something
 - a) It means that Jesus is being recognized as the Messiah spoken of in the OT
 4. Here again in the third verse Wesley references Philippians with the line, “mild He lays His glory by” - Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be held onto
 5. Then Wesley refers to the mission of Jesus
 - a) He came that man would no more die
 - (1) Obviously many people died between Jesus day and Wesley’s day - so what of this line?
 - (2) We understand that He is referring to spiritual death and separation from God
 - b) Jesus came to give us second birth - spiritual birth
 - (1) A reference to John 3 when Jesus was talking with Nicodemus
- D. Now, there are two verses that George Whitefield dropped in the more popular version of the song
1. Sadly, as we saw last week, they contain some great theology
 2. It is a shame that we have not put these verses back in so that our theology would be stronger
- E. The fourth verse takes us back to the garden of Eden
1. “Come, desire of nations come, fix in us thy humble home; rise, the woman’s conquering seed, bruise in us the serpent’s head; Now display thy saving power, ruin’d nature now restore, Now in mystic union join, thine to ours and ours to thine”
 - a) A reference to Haggai 2:7 again - we looked at this verse two weeks ago with the first Charles Wesley song we reviewed
 2. “Fix in us thy humble home”
 - a) A request for our hearts to be Christ’s home
 3. “Rise the woman’s conquering seed, bruise in us the serpents head”
 - a) This is where we go back to the garden
 - b) Genesis 3:14-15
 - c) Romans 16:20 - while not a reference to Christ overcoming Satan, it alludes to the situation back in the garden where Jesus will defeat Satan
 - d) But even beyond that, the lyrics are a petition for Christ to rise up and help beat Satan in our daily life
 - (1) It’s bruise in us the serpents head

Christmas Hymns

(2) Help us to overcome sin and temptation that Satan tries to sow into our lives

4. The rest of the verse

a) “Now display thy saving power, ruin’d nature now restore, Now in mystic union join, thine to ours, and ours to thine”

b) This verse is really quite awesome

(1) The singer is asking for God’s saving power to restore the nature that was ruined by the fall of man

(2) Further they are looking forward to the mystical union with the spirit of Christ Himself

c) We don’t talk like this anymore!

(1) We should!

(2) This part of the verse alone has some heavy theology behind it regarding the fall of man, the nature of man, the restoration of that nature by God’s Holy Spirit in us

F. The final verse is more strong theology which continues the thoughts

1. “Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface, Stamp thy image in its place, Second Adam from above, reinstate us in thy love”

a) Again, the singer is asking for this marred image of Adam to be erased (the meaning of efface), and for God’s image to be stamped on us

(1) We don’t think this way anymore

(2) Maybe if we held onto these verses we would think like this in our personal walk with Christ

b) The second Adam is Jesus Christ

(1) Romans 5:12-19

(2) Adam brought sin to the whole world

(3) Christ brought salvation for the whole world

2. “Let us thee, though lost, regain, Thee, the life, the inner man, O, to all thyself impart, Formed in each believing heart”

a) Again, Whitefield is pleading with God for us to regain the perfect image and person that humanity once was, and can be again through Christ

b) Then Whitefield takes it one step further and asks not just for Himself, but for Christ to be received in each believing heart

V. Let’s go over a few final lessons we can take from this Christmas hymn

A. First let’s go back to the lives of Wesley and Whitefield

1. Both were boundary pushers when it came to how worship and church were done

a) They did not exceed what the Bible said about obedience and sin

b) But they pushed other longstanding boundaries

Christmas Hymns

2. One had a more gentle style - Wesley
3. One was more the proverbial bull in a china shop - Whitefield
4. I find it interesting that the hymns that we cherish were created by people pushing the accepted boundaries back in their day
 - a) The worship wars are not new
 - b) They extend back to Wesley's day, and if I did more research, I'm guessing I would find even before that
5. Point is, that change in worship is needed for each successive generation, as long as it does not violate the Bible itself

B. Second thing we can learn is from the feud of Wesley and Whitefield themselves

1. The fact is that in this life we may not get along with each person we encounter in ministry
2. We have two very large names in church history here that could not get along
3. And while I will not defend Whitefield for his actions by taking Wesley's song, neither will I defend Wesley for his reaction
 - a) God used each man in great ways because they were available to Him, and they sought to use the gifts God gave them for His glory
 - b) It goes to illustrate that even great men of God that God uses have blind spots and need to be open to people that might want to help them see those spots

C. A third thing we see is how deep the theology was in these songs

1. We went over this last week, but it bears repeating and expanding
2. Did you notice how many different scriptures we turned to in explaining this song?
 - a) That is in part because of Wesley's training and knowledge
 - b) It is also in part because the birth of Christ is bigger than just the story we read in Luke 2
3. It shows us how much we need to know our scriptures
 - a) We need to study them
 - (1) That means, just like there was a test
 - (2) Because there is - every day you encounter others - that is a test
 - b) We need to study and know our theology
 - (1) No, you don't have to take Greek to study theology
 - (2) But yes, you need to know it
 - (3) It is the foundation of our faith and we must understand it
 - (a) And not by way of the Pastor
 - (b) Meaning, because he knows it, I'm all right

Christmas Hymns

CONCLUSION: These stories about the Christmas hymns are fascinating! Learning the long last lyrics is wonderful. Hopefully, this will bring new meaning and new life to our favorite Christmas carols that we sing, and it will remind us of the biblical stories and the theology we need to understand.